

A Sky Full of Stars

by Ann Brill White

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Summary: How Alonzo Solace got hired on to the Eden Project.

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"A Sky Full of Stars" by Ann White

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_You can fly and never land. And never need to sleep.
> But will it ever be enough? You know it'll never be enough.

- Meat Loaf, _Original Sin_

3 December, 2191, 1834 Standard Time

"Neptune Orbital Proximity Array contacted. Transmitting identification and coordinates." The Ceres-class cargo ship said in an electronically-simulated female voice to no one in particular. An amber light flashed on the otherwise-dark cockpit dashboard. "Identification and coordinates confirmed. Slowing to one-half sublight speed." Creaks and groans answered the disembodied voice as the massive engines slowed. "Restoring artificial gravity and life-support systems." The amber light changed to green, and the left-most section of the dashboard came alive with dozens of multi-colored lights. A pair of white fuzzy dice that had been floating freely in the cabin dropped to the seat below as gravity returned to normal. "Activating cryogenic suspension bay number one. Pilot Alonzo Solace. Body core temperature rising. Alpha brain wave pattern at seventy-five percent of normal."

In the cryogenic suspension section of the freighter _Eridani_, a lone figure awoke from a four-year slumber. He yawned, ran his fingers through his tousled black wavy hair, and sat up. He swung his legs over the side of the cryo chamber, and stood up slowly. He'd

been through enough awakenings that he knew to take it easy for the first minute or so, until all of his parts were in working order. Speaking of working order... He staggered to the head to relieve himself. As he left the head, he stretched upwards, pulling himself up onto the door jamb. "One... two... three..." he counted off chin-ups as his muscles shook off the cryogenic stiffness. After that, he went straight to the shower, to wash up and steam the final stiffness from his well-muscled body.

His "morning" routine completed, Alonzo Solace made his way towards the cockpit of the Eridani. "Status check," he ordered. He picked up the dice and placed them on the dashboard, then slid with an accustomed familiarity into the pilot's seat.

"NOPA encountered at 1834 standard time," the electronic female voice relayed. "The array has relayed a flight plan for the rest of the journey to Earth. "

"What's our ETA?" Alonzo asked, checking over the beacon's coordinates.

"The ship will arrive at Earth orbit in approximately 48 hours," the computer answered.

"Great news. You know," the pilot reflected to the uncaring computer voice, "travel outside the Solar System has gotten a lot better since the Orbital Array was built twenty years ago. I mean, before then, you had to guess when you were going to arrive in the Solar System. And, if your proximity sensors had taken a beating during the trip, you might wake up inside Saturn's gravity well, if you woke up at all."

"Cargo status: one hundred metric tons of Fullerite are secure in cargo bay one, and another fifty tons of raw industrial-grade diamonds are secure in cargo bays one and two." The computer continued to give the status report, oblivious to Alonzo's musings.

Alonzo shook his head. "Guess you don't really care about reminiscing," he chuckled to the computer. He reached up and hung the dice from an overhead hook. "I suppose I'd better wake up the rest of the crew. They're gonna want some time to adjust to being away for eight years." He reached behind him and pressed several amber-colored lights. They immediately turned to green. "Awakening the navigator, comtech, and Ops chief," he said aloud. "Rise and shine, folks. There's no place like home."

His job completed for the time being, Alonzo started one more important piece of equipment - the coffee maker. His bridge crew would be needing the caffeine after their long sleep. He helped himself to a cup, then kicked back in the pilot's seat and watched the Solar System unfold in front of him. The closest was Neptune, a bluish-green gas giant. Its moon, Triton, housed the control for the Orbital beacon that had become so valuable to travelers outside the Solar System. Strategically placed along Neptune's orbit were other beacons, so that one could approach the system from any direction. Farther in the distance, a disk about an inch (as he saw it) in diameter was Uranus. The other outer planets, Saturn and Jupiter, appeared as bright stars. From this distance, the Sun was merely a twinkling yellow star - not quite as bright as its two largest

planets. Alonzo never got tired of the sight. It was a sky full of stars, and it was his goal to visit every one of them before he retired. In his opinion, he had the best job in the universe.

4 December, 1700 Standard Time

"_Eridani_, this is Ganymede Base. Welcome home." The communications officer at the military base on Jupiter's third moon hailed them. Alonzo turned and nodded to his technical officer, a tall black man named Baines, with a shaved head and a smart-aleck attitude. Alonzo had worked five runs with the guy, but had yet to find out Baines's first name.

"Roger, Ganymede Base. It's good to be back," Baines answered.

"How's things out at the Barnard's system colony?" the officer at Ganymede asked.

"They're doing great out there. Have a nice little mining operation going. They've discovered some rare-earth minerals out there."

"Sounds good," the tech replied, sounding wistful. "I did a tour out there about three years ago. Nice colony they've got there. I'm hoping to head out there once my enlistment is up."

Alonzo jumped into the conversation. "If that's what you want, Barnard's colony is the place to be. Colonizing a planet isn't exactly the way I want to spend my old age."

"That's Solace, isn't it? Hey, 'Lonz! It's Sam Travis!"

Alonzo grinned. He remembered back ten years ago, when he met young Lieutenant Sam Travis. "I'll be damned! How's it going, Lieutenant?"

"That's Major Travis to you, ya old space-dog. I've got myself a girl back home, and we're thinking about moving out to Barnard's colony when I get out."

"Lucky guy. Look me up when you get out. I'll be happy to drive you and the little lady out there personally. So, what's the asteroid forecast, Sammy?"

The Ganymede base, along with its counterpart on Mars, mainly functioned to monitor the shipping lanes in and out of the asteroid belt. Transiting the belt was the trickiest part of any trip beyond Mars. The military kept a close watch on the orbiting rocks, transmitting the latest "weather" report to incoming and outgoing ships. It was boring but necessary work.

"Transmitting the latest coordinates to your nav as we speak."

The navigator, a slim, icy young woman named Jenna Stewart, nodded. "Acknowledge receipt. Thanks, Ganymede base," she answered. Jenna's voice had a faint British accent, which revealed her childhood in the European Union stations. Alonzo shrugged. Unlike the easy banter between himself and Baines, his relationship with Jenna was coolly professional. Not for lack of trying. However, Stewart was as icy as

the surface of Triton. Personally, Alonzo liked the challenge, even though Jenna had shut him down at every turn.

"Then you are good to go, Eridani. Have a safe trip, y'all," Travis wished them well.

"You take care, Sam," Alonzo answered. "Baines, Stewart, look sharp. I trust the military's data, but I've always found a few surprises in there." Not that he had to say anything. Stewart was the best nav in the business, even if she was a cold customer.

"Entering asteroid belt in three minutes," Stewart marked. Alonzo focused on the job ahead, visualizing the Ceres-class vessel cruising past any hazards.

"Two minutes," Stewart's voice cut through the silence. "One minute thirty."

"Transferring all available power to shields," Alonzo said as he pushed some buttons on the console. "Forward sensors at one hundred percent."

"Now entering the asteroid belt in five...four...three...two...MARK!"

Alonzo took a deep breath as the big freighter moved into the fray. "Nav, what's our first bogie?" He asked without taking his eyes off the forward view screen.

"Coming up on port side."

"Veering ten degrees starboard to compensate," Alonzo answered. The ship tilted slightly to the right before the stabilizers compensated. They breathed a sigh of relief as a large asteroid drifted past their screen. "Got by that one. What's up next?"

"Dead ahead. This one's wide, but not high. Drop down five degrees."

"Roger." Alonzo pulled the joystick control back, and the Eridani answered sluggishly. "She's a real pig. The cargo must be slowing down the response time."

"Yeah, those miners stuffed our hold to the last millimeter," Baines agreed, continuing to stare at the sensor readout. "Asteroid is passing over us with room to spare," he informed the rest of the bridge crew.

The three of them continued to dodge asteroids for the better part of an hour. So far, Alonzo thought, the Ganymede base's data was holding up. No big surprises - or little ones, for that matter. The shields on the Ceres-class ship could deflect any rock or space garbage up to a meter in diameter. After that, all it took was good data, and the skill of the pilot and navigator. Fortunately for this pig of a freighter, three of the best were sitting in the bridge.

A little over an hour into the asteroid belt, things went to hell in a handbasket. Alonzo had juked the ship hard to starboard to avoid a fast-moving rock. After stabilizing, something felt wrong in the Eridani's responses. "Baines, run an internal check. I'm getting a

bad feeling about this. She's responding differently. Something's gone wrong."

Baines shot him a puzzled look, but checked the sensors anyway. Alonzo couldn't help but notice the change in the ship's handling. It felt like it had a slight pull toward starboard.

"You're right, 'Lonz," Baines confirmed. "The mass in cargo bay three has shifted, and we're off-balance by three degrees starboard. It's increasing our drag coefficient."

"We've got more trouble," Stewart chimed in. "Bogie coming up on our starboard side, at two o'clock."

"Turning ten degrees to port to compensate," Alonzo answered. If he didn't execute this turn perfectly, they'd be in big trouble. He heard Jenna's sharp intake of breath as the asteroid approached. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Baines working furiously. "Baines, increase power to shields."

"I'm on it," he answered. The asteroid approached, then gradually passed to the right of their viewscreen. Alonzo was just about to let out his breath when the ship jerked, then suddenly slowed to one-quarter of its previous speed.

"Shank it!" Baines swore. "It's been caught in our gravity well! We're dragging it along in our wake."

"Affirmative. The asteroid is orbiting the ship just outside of our shielding," Stewart confirmed. "Orbit is highly unstable. If the orbit decays, the asteroid will crash into the hull."

Alonzo took a deep breath. Time to fly by the seat of his pants. Fortunately, that was what Alonzo Solace did best. It was why he got paid premium Guild rates. "Okay, here's what we're going to do. We have one shot at this, so make it count." Baines and Stewart looked up at him. Baines' bald head was covered in sweat. Stewart's cool professionalism was beginning to crack. He winked at her, and she smiled in relief. "Baines, I want you to drop the shields."

"DROP them??" Baines gasped incredulously. "You can't be serious!"

"I'm dead serious," Alonzo shot back. "I want you to drop the shields. Jenna, I need an exact position on that rock. When it gets within a meter of the hull, we raise the shields. With a little bit of luck, the shields will push the rock out of orbit, and away from us."

"And if we don't have luck?" Baines asked.

"Drop the shields," Alonzo ordered. Baines hesitated, and Alonzo glared at him.

"Dropping shields now," Baines responded.

"Asteroid is closing in," Stewart relayed the readout. A tremble of fear was beginning to show in her voice. "Fifty meters....forty....thirty...." she continued.

"This'd better work," Baines muttered.

Alonzo allowed himself a quick glance at his lucky dice hanging over his seat. So far, every run he'd brought them on had turned out all right. Would his luck run out today? "It'll work," he reassured his friend.

"Ten meters!" Jenna shouted.

"Baines, raise shields on my mark."

"Eight... seven... six... five... four... three..."

"NOW!" Alonzo ordered. Baines frantically punched buttons on his console, as Alonzo gave a quick burst on the rear thrusters.

"It worked!" Jenna cried out. "The shields pushed the asteroid out of our gravity well!" She exhaled with a loud sigh of relief.

Baines grinned, his white teeth flashing in his walnut-colored face. "You did it, man."

Alonzo shook his head. "Nah, we did it. We're a team," he flashed a dimpled smile to Baines, then Stewart. "We're the best shankin' team in the Spacing Guild!"

"Ops to Flight Deck," the intercom interrupted their celebration. "What the hell is going on up there? First we had this giant rock orbiting us. Then, we got knocked around by a burst of speed. Are you guys drunk up there or something?"

"Not yet, Ops," Alonzo chuckled into the intercom. "But I owe you guys one when we get back home."

5 December, 1026 Standard Time
>

Eighteen hours later, the cargo vessel Eridani reached far-Earth orbit with no additional problems. Alonzo piloted her around the dark side of the moon, within site of the ever-expanding Luna mining community. Luna Colony had been founded about the time Alonzo was born - almost a century ago. What had started out as a small mining and research outpost had grown into a full-sized city, complete with it's own gravity-ball team, orchestra, internet satellites, and other amenities that station-dwellers were used to. As they passed over the Luna beacon, the flight crew saw Earth.

Their home planet was a blue, cloud-streaked sphere, its sparkling surface hiding the environmental devastation below the atmosphere. Earth was ringed by dozens of space stations of various construction styles. They were floating in geocentric orbit like a necklace. Most of them were the circular, spoked-wheel design that turned slowly in order to create artificial gravity. These, Alonzo knew, were the hallmark Adair Design Corporation units. Some newer designs, however, were more tubular. They looked almost like giant cans, with no artistry in their architecture. As Alonzo watched, a shuttle departed from the center of one of the rings, down the gravity well to the Earth's surface. Other small shuttles ferried passengers between stations, lights flickering like fireflies back on Earth.

The voice of the traffic controller came over the speaker. "Incoming vessel, please identify yourself," the controller ordered.

"Got it," Baines told Alonzo, then opened a channel. "Earth Port Control, this is VA-1108, the Eridani, out of Barnard's Star Colony. Our approach vector is 170 by 25 mark 3. "

"Roger, VA-1108. This is Port Control. We confirm your vector." The female voice on the radio answered routinely. "Status of cargo?"

"We have a load of unprocessed industrial diamonds and Fullerite from Barnard's Colony," Baines replied. "Requesting landing vector."

Alonzo heard the clicking of keys on a keyboard as the controller found them an open berth. "VA-1108, we have an open heavy-cargo berth at Euro Twelve Port. I have you slotted in Level 65, docking bay 7-alpha. I repeat, Level 65, docking bay 7-alpha. Do you copy?"

Alonzo nodded to Jenna, who plotted in the course. She then nodded to Baines. "Course laid in. Thanks, Port Control," he informed them.

"You're welcome, VA-1108. Port Control out."

"Changing course on my mark," Alonzo ordered. "Mark." The Eridani shuddered, then turned to starboard toward the station.

"Estimated time of arrival is fifteen minutes," Baines concurred.

"Thanks," Alonzo flicked on the internal communications switch. "Attention, all hands. We'll be arriving at Euro Twelve Space Dock in approximately fifteen minutes. Prepare for docking and off-loading cargo."

They barely had time to enjoy the sights as the Euro Twelve station loomed into the viewscreen. It was time for the final performance. Baines switched to the in-port frequency and contacted the administrator. Jenna linked the Eridani's navigational computer into the APEX system, which would guide them to the specified berth. Alonzo cut power to all engines. From here on in, they'd be powered by maneuvering thrusters only. Alonzo positioned the Eridani to enter the port, as the massive airlock doors opened like a seed splitting its hull. Once the doors were open, Baines received the go-ahead from the controller, and Alonzo maneuvered the ship into bay 10. A satisfying bump told him that they had arrived in the bay.

"Welcome home," Alonzo announced as the mechanical umbilical extended out from the wall. "All hands, prep for umbilical docking on the port side. Prepare to open airlock." Over the intercom, he heard the Ops crew jovially going about their business as they greeted the dockhands that would take over responsibility from there. "Baines, Jenna, make your final checks, then let's blow this place and head over to the Guild Hall. First round's on me," he grinned. After five minutes or so, they left to gather what few belongings they had out of their lockers, then departed the ship. Alonzo's lucky dice were

tucked away in a safe place inside his flight jacket. _My luck held out this time,_ he thought as he patted them. _Hopefully, I didn't use it all up. I mean, maybe even Jenna will warm up to me._ He smiled his dimpled grin at the serious navigator as they left the ship. She returned a friendly but firm shake of her head. _Then again, maybe not._

5 December, 1330 Standard Time

Alonzo, Baines and Jenna hopped a shuttle from Euro Twelve to the NorthAm One station. They made their way through the crowded port area to the main offices of the International Spacing Guild. The Guild was the enormous bureaucracy that governed space travel outside of Earth/Luna orbit. They trained pilots and flight crews, built freighters, scheduled cargo runs, and dealt with all of the administrivia of space travel. Anyone who wanted to set foot outside of Lunar orbit had to go through the Guild. They were second only to the Inter-Station Council in power and influence. Rumors abounded that the two mega-bureaucracies were one and the same. Alonzo didn't care about politics, or who was running the Guild these days. The Guild took care of its own.

The entry hall of the Guild headquarters was awe-inspiring, even for someone as jaded as Alonzo Solace. The entire 100-meter wide lobby was paneled in black marble, shipped from the Aldrin mine on Luna Colony. The back wall was made entirely of reinforced plastiglass, which provided a panoramic view of the heavens. Along the side wall, across from the receptionist, was a phrase carved into the black marble and illuminated with a single spotlight. It read: _One small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind_ - the first words spoken on another world. On the other side of the elevators was another carving; the names of those who had been the first humans to venture into the great void of space - Gagarin, Glenn, Shepard, and many others. Alonzo allowed himself a brief glance at the wall as they walked toward the elevators, Stewart and Baines flanking him.

They reached the elevators, and Alonzo briefly scanned the station directory for the human resources department. "Looks like HR's moved up to the ninth floor," Baines remarked casually to Alonzo and Jenna. "Wonder when that happened?"

"Occupational hazard, man," Alonzo cracked. "You go away for eight years, and they move everything around on you. I've been through it more times than I can count."

"You would think they'd finally settle on one floor and leave it there," Stewart agreed. "Coming back after a cold-sleep run is disorienting enough without having to find where the main office is."

The elevator reached the lobby, and the three of them entered. With a quick whoosh that left Alonzo's heart in his stomach, they were on the ninth floor. The elevator doors opened to a well-appointed office, the walls painted a light beige with dark green trim. The entire floor was a maze of walled cubicles, with various offices interspersed for the management types. To their left, a perky, young, blonde secretary was filing her nails. She looked up as the _Eridani_'s crew approached, and guiltily hid her nail file. A name plate by her desk read "Lucy Moran".

"May I help you?" Miss Moran asked in a high-pitched, breathy voice. Then, she looked up directly into Alonzo's face and her jaw dropped. "I..err... I...uh..." she stammered. Behind him, Alonzo heard Baines snort in derision. The bubble-headed secretary wasn't the first woman to be struck speechless by the sight of the good-looking pilot. However, she wasn't really Alonzo's type. After all the years and all the women, he had come to enjoy the chase. The ones that fell into his arms weren't worth it anymore.

"Yes," he began. "We're the crew of VA-1108, the Eridani. Solace, Stewart and Baines. We'd like to check in, please."

"Um, uh, certainly," Miss Moran replied. "Can I have your positions," - Baines snickered - "and Guild registry numbers, please?"

"Solace, pilot number 1287," Alonzo answered.

"Baines. That's with an e," Baines joked. "Communications officer number 7390."

"Stewart. Navigator number 3295."

Miss Moran spoke into a modified gear set, and the information came up on her computer screen, along with their pictures. She touched a few panels on the screen to assign them room numbers, pull their personal belongings out of storage, and activate their credit accounts. "Okay, Mister Baines. You'll be staying in room number 2107, section Bravo. Here is your key card and credit card." She handed him two cards. "Ms. Stewart, you're in room 875, section Alpha. Your key card and credit card. Mr. Solace, you're in room 432, section Bravo." She looked up at Alonzo and winked at him as she handed him his cards, as if she expected him to invite her over after work. He smiled, but tried not to give her any ideas. "Your credit accounts and personal avatars have been activated. You've also been placed into the active duty roster, so you'll be receiving information on any openings starting tomorrow at 0800 station time. Your personal belongings will be taken out of storage, and should be in your rooms in approximately an hour. If you have any problems, don't hesitate to call me on 6375." She grinned at Alonzo again. "Welcome home."

After finishing out the rest of the administrivia that came along with returning several tons of cargo from the outlying colonies, Alonzo finally made his way up to Bravo 432. The Guild maintained furnished apartments for personnel to use between long-term assignments. With living quarters at a premium on the Stations, the Guild had found it more economical to place members' personal belongings into storage for several years, then to pull them out when the member returned. This "timesharing" process had gone through some refinements over the time that Alonzo had been a pilot. Unlike other times, he arrived at his assigned quarters to find an invoice for three modular units for his personal belongings. He examined the units to make sure that everything was there. Satisfied, Alonzo turned and surveyed his living quarters.

The apartment was standard Guild housing - one bedroom, a bathroom with a shower stall, kitchenette, and living room. It came complete with a sofa, chairs, dinette, dresser, nightstand, and -- most

important to Alonzo -- a queen-size bed. A desk with computer screen sat in one corner, and a vid-screen was set up opposite of the sofa. Alonzo walked into the bedroom and dropped his rucksack on the bed. The bed had been made up with clean linens - all the comforts of home. A window about one meter square was opposite of the bed. It allowed the Spacers to wake up looking out at the stars, appropriately enough. On the wall behind him, Alonzo saw the door to a closet.

"Not bad. I guess the Guild finally spent some money on their housing," he commented aloud. He crossed back into the bedroom and powered up the computer terminal on the desk. "Invoking personal avatar for Alonzo Solace, Guild identification number 1287, designation, Pilot First Class."

"Welcome back, Pilot Alonzo Solace," the computer answered in a female voice. "Avatar loaded." Abruptly, the screen came to life, and Alonzo found himself staring back at his own digitized image frozen onto the screen. "Begin avatar," he ordered.

"This is Pilot First Class Alonzo Solace," his computer-generated image began. "I'm currently out on assignment. I am expected back sometime in December, 2191. If this is an emergency, please contact the Spacing Guild personnel office," his message finished.

"Computer, delete message," Alonzo ordered. "Any messages?"

"One message," his digitized image answered. "Playing now."

His image winked out, and was replaced by the beautiful face of a blonde woman. She looked both happy and sad at the same time. "Lydia," Alonzo grinned.

"Hello, Alonzo. I know you won't get this message for at least two years. However, I had to let you know. I found a wonderful man here at Garsonia Starbase. We're getting married tomorrow. I'm sorry. We had fun, but I'm ready to settle down. I'll always love you. Goodbye," Lydia smiled, then winked out, to be replaced by "message received 16 April 2190."

"Oh, well," Alonzo shrugged. "It was good while it lasted. However, there's plenty more fish in the sea. And, once I get cleaned up, it's time to go fishing."

Stargazers, a raucous bar at the outer rim of NorthAm One, was the unofficial watering hole for the employees of the Spacing Guild. Located on the promenade level below Guild headquarters, Stargazers offered all kinds of entertainment - legal or otherwise. It boasted several zero-gee bubbles, where couples - or more - could do whatever came naturally. Of course, if you had an urge to go to the zero-gee bubbles, there were several members of either sex willing to accommodate you - for the right price. A specially ventilated room offered all sorts of illegal inhalants like tobacco, marijuana, hashish, etc. Gambling, sex, drugs, alcohol, sports on the holovid, games of chance, food - you name it, and it could be found at Stargazers. Alonzo loved the place. It was, to quote an old phrase, a place where everybody knew his name. As he entered the dark main room

and looked for Baines and Jenna, he felt like he was coming home.

He spotted Baines in a booth along the wall, waving frantically at him. He strode across the room, oblivious to the opportunistic stares of many of the patrons - female and male. Alonzo grinned at his friends, and promptly sat down next to Jenna. She gave him a nasty look, but moved over quickly. Baines poured his friend a glass of beer from the pitcher on the table.

"So, did the Ops crew manage to get the cargo offloaded without banging it around any more?" he asked Baines.

"Yeah. That was some fancy flyin' in the Belt, man" he answered.

"That's why they call me Ace," Alonzo grinned.

"Oh, please. Spare us the masculine ego," Jenna rolled her eyes. "You seem to forget that you had some help."

"Jenna, honey, I could never forget you," Alonzo stretched out and put his arm around her. That earned him a frigid stare, but he didn't back off.

"Anyhow," Jenna changed the subject, "are you gentlemen looking for another assignment? I think I'm going on a holiday. Maybe do some travelling on Luna, or even Mars."

Alonzo snorted into his beer. "Not me. There's ships to fly and money to be made."

"What good is earning credits if you're never around to spend them?" Jenna replied.

Alonzo opened his mouth to speak, but he couldn't come up with a retort to Jenna's logic. Finally, he asked, "but what about the adventure, Jen? Seeing new worlds? Flying farther than anyone's gone before? Dammit, there's a whole galaxy out there waiting for us!"

Jenna gave him a withering look. "New worlds? How many new colonies have been established in the past twenty years, Alonzo? We keep making short hops to places like Proxima Centauri and Barnard's Star. They're both under ten light-years away. The Council won't let anyone go farther, because they'll be out from under their control."

"Jenna! Shhhh!" Baines warned and looked around suspiciously. "We just got back today. We don't know what politics are going on, much less who's hanging out here listening in. You keep talking like that, you'll be taking a permanent holiday." Jenna flushed red, even in the dim light of the booth.

"Relax, Baines," Alonzo smiled uneasily. "I don't think the Council particularly cares what a bunch of crazy Spacers say." He winked surreptitiously at Jenna.

Their conversation was interrupted when a waitress arrived at their table, bearing another pitcher of reddish-gold beer. She placed it

down in the middle of the table, and looked surprised when she saw the first pitcher was still partly filled. All three of the flight crew looked up at the waitress. "Don't ask me. A lady over there," she nodded toward the bar, "wanted to buy you guys a drink." They followed her eyes, and noticed a tall redheaded woman dressed in a pilot's jumpsuit and bomber jacket waving back at them from the bar.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Alonzo beckoned her over. "That's no lady - that's Sheila Willis! Get over here, girl!" Sheila sauntered over to their table. "How the hell are you?" Alonzo grinned.

Sheila promptly sat down next to Baines, who had scooted over in the booth. "I'm doing great, Ace. Just got in yesterday from a run to Proxima Centauri. I'm just hangin' out here waiting for my next job, and getting caught up with everyone. What about you guys? Bainesy, Jen? Has Ace here been treating you right?"

Baines smiled, his white teeth glinting from his dark skin. "We ran into a little trouble in the Belt on our way back, but nothing we couldn't handle."

"Glad to hear that. Hey, since I paid for your pitcher, do y'mind if I pour myself one?" Sheila helped herself to their beer. Alonzo grinned. Sheila could drink almost anyone under the table. She was also one of the premier pilots in the Guild.

"So, how are things out at ProxCen, Sheila?" Jenna inquired.

"Growing every run. Pretty soon they're gonna be as civilized as Mars is. So much for the final frontier."

Jenna sighed. "I suppose that's what happens when you ship pampered Station blokes out past the rim," she shrugged. "I'll tell you, this job isn't what it used to be."

Sheila frowned at Jenna. Alonzo could sense some kind of non-verbal connection between Sheila and Jen as they continued to talk across the table. He was beginning to worry.

"Excuse me," Jenna interrupted his thoughts, "Alonzo, could you let me out, please? I need to go to the little pilot's room." He stood up and let Jenna out of the booth. Sheila followed her to the restroom.

"What is it about women that they always have to go to the head in pairs?" Baines commented.

"I hope that's not what I think it is," Alonzo speculated.

Baines arched one eyebrow, took a sip of beer, and asked, "What do you think it is?"

"I think we might be losing Jenna's services to Sheila's team."

"I hope not," Baines replied. "She's a damn good navigator."

"The best. But, we're all free agents now. At least until the next job," Alonzo answered. He sincerely hoped that he wouldn't be proven

wrong.

6 December, 0815 Standard Time

Alonzo awoke to the sound of his avatar beginning to record a message. He couldn't hear who it was over the ringing in his ears. He sat up, then immediately fell back against the pillow with a throbbing headache. "Shank it," he muttered, "that's the last time I drink with Sheila Willis." His head felt like he'd been dumped out the airlock.

The avatar beeped at him. "One message recorded at 0815 station time," it reported.

"Oh, go away," he threw a pillow at it.

"Priority One message from Spacing Guild Dispatch," the avatar continued.

That got his attention. "Spacing Guild Dispatch?" he echoed. "Aw, shank it!" He sat up, ignoring the hangover. "Avatar, playback Priority One message."

"Beginning message," it started. Then, the face of an attractive woman came onto the screen. She had short red hair cut into a chin-length bob, pale green eyes, full lips, and the high cheekbones and sloping nose of a person with Slavic background. "_Privyet_, Alonzo. It's Marisa," she stated.

Marisa Sergeevna Ivanova, to be exact. She was a member of his class in flight school, a former lover, and one of the few other pilots that matched his level of expertise. Marisa had been a shopkeeper's daughter on the Mir-13 station when a Guild recruiter noticed her comprehension of complex astrophysics. Alonzo and Marisa had been lovers, but had lost track of each other once they began taking jobs.

"I set my avatar to alert me when yours became active, so I know you're back from your latest run. I need to talk to you, Alonzo. Can we meet for lunch? How about that little Italian place over in Euro Two? And, Alonzo, you never heard from me. _Do svidanya._" The screen went black, then the Guild logo returned.

Little Italian place over in Euro Two? She must mean the Primadonna. I wonder why she wants to have lunch all the way over there? Something's up, he reasoned. _It's not like Marisa to be secretive._ He pressed the button to acknowledge her message, and confirm that he would meet her at the restaurant at noon. _Just enough time to get cleaned up and try to catch the round-robin shuttle for Euro Two,_ he thought. But, first of all, some aspirin for this hangover. Not that Marisa hadn't ever seen him with a hangover! But, it had been a very long time since the day after graduation, when they'd polished off a bottle of vodka between them. He'd puked up his guts, while Marisa laughed and claimed that Italians couldn't drink anything stronger than wine.

Fortunately, that was in the past. All he had to do now was find out why she was being so secretive, and why her message had come from Guild Dispatch. It promised to be an interesting lunch.

Euro Two Space Station, 1200 Hours

Alonzo walked into the Primadonna restaurant right on time. He'd even had time to stop at a barber shop and get a haircut. The hostess led him directly to the table that Marisa had reserved. She wasn't there yet. He ordered a glass of wine - for medicinal purposes - as Marisa arrived at the restaurant. He looked her over appreciatively as she walked toward him. Marisa was a slight woman who had dreamt of being a gymnast before she was recruited by the Guild as a pilot. She was dressed in what seemed to be the current fashion among professional women - a skin-tight emerald green jumpsuit, low heeled shoes, and a small microfiber handbag. Frankly, she looked as good as ever.

As Marisa was seated, Alonzo noticed that she wasn't looking as good as he first thought. There were dark circles under her eyes - as well as laugh lines. She looked like she needed a day off more than anything else. Her face lit up into a smile, something that Alonzo guessed that she didn't do too often these days.

"Hello, Alonzo," she grinned. "It's been a long time."

"Hi, Marisa. How many years has it been?"

"Too many," she replied. "How are you? You're looking good."

"Same old same old. I just got back from Barnard's and looking for another gig. What about you? How have you been?"

She paused as the waiter came with water and rolls. They ordered their lunches, then continued. "That's kind of what I wanted to talk to you about. You see, I've been through a lot of changes in the past few years."

"I can see that," he urged her on.

Marisa sighed, then went on. "It all started about nine years ago, after my last run. I met a man while I was visiting my nieces and nephews. Misha, I mean Mikhail, was wonderful. He was a shuttle pilot. He was impressed that I flew interstellar runs, and wanted to learn all about it. "We fell in love. No hard feelings, right?"

"Of course not", Alonzo replied. "Misha's a lucky guy, getting you. What happened?"

"When he proposed, I left active duty and became a trainer. We took out the standard four-year marriage contract. Two years later, our son, Sergei Mikhailovich, was born."

"Well, congratulations!" Alonzo interjected. "Although I'd never expected you to settle down and have a family, Marisa. When can I meet your husband and son?"

She smiled ruefully. "Sergei was a very sickly child," she continued. "Although the doctor assured us that he was fine, I began to suspect something. I took him to another doctor, who diagnosed Sergei as having The Syndrome."

Alonzo's jaw dropped. "Oh, Marisa. That's awful. I'd heard rumors about some mysterious disease before I left. What is it exactly?"

"No one really knows what causes it," Marisa shrugged. "There have been a lot of theories, though. It may be an auto-immune deficiency that affects the lungs, mostly. Sort of a combination of AIDS and the asthma that was prevalent on Earth before the Skylift. It attacks children, and it's very aggressive. No Syndrome child has ever lived to their ninth birthday."

"Aren't people trying to find a cure? I mean, back when we were growing up, we heard about medical breakthroughs all the time. What about research into it?"

She paused again as the waiter brought their salads. "That's what I'm doing here. The Guild has been great, Alonzo. They transferred me out of the training area, where I would have to be away for days at a time. You remember how it was. I'm working in dispatch now. At least I can keep track of my old friends," she smiled at him.

"What about your husband? Where does he figure in all of this?"

Her smile quickly turned to a frown. "Misha had trouble dealing with the demands that a Syndrome child places on a marriage. He elected not to renew our marriage contract. However, he does send me child support, and sees Seryozha as often as he can."

"He couldn't deal with a sick kid, so he left you to bear the burden alone? Wonderful guy, Marisa," Alonzo smirked and took a bite of the crisp lettuce.

"It's not that bad. Because of my Guild connections, I've managed to get Sergei into the top Syndrome facility. It's in this Station, run by a doctor named Emilio Vasquez. He's got some radical ideas about the causes of the Syndrome, and he's doing some great research. Which is where you come in."

"_Me?_" Alonzo asked surprisedly. "What can _I_ do to help your son?"

They paused again as the waiter brought their entrees and removed the salad plates. Marisa had ordered pasta primavera, and Alonzo had fettucine alfredo. He could afford the calories more than Marisa could.

"Dr. Vasquez believes that The Syndrome is caused by the overly-sterile environment we have here on the Stations. The Council won't talk about it, because they don't want to publicly admit that they're to blame. They've demonized The Syndrome, made it sound like it was the fault of the parents. Some of the more fanatical elements say that it's God's punishment for our lack of morals, and that we should abandon family planning and marriage contracts. _Govno_!" she swore in her native language.

"So, what does this have to do with me?" Alonzo asked between bites of fettucine.

She bent over the table, as if she wanted to tell him a secret. "The head of the Adair Design Corporation, Devon Adair, has a son in the same clinic as Sergei. In fact, he's friends with the Adair boy. She's leading an expedition to establish an unsanctioned colony. Have you ever heard of G889?"

Alonzo's eyebrows shot up. "G889? Isn't that the Fomalhaut system? Heck, that's 22 light-years away! Nobody except the Pontel 7 astronauts have been that far! Where did this Adair woman find out about this planet?"

"She has her sources, I suppose," Marisa shrugged. "She has a retired Fleet commander, Broderick O'Neill, working for her. He's the one that's organizing this expedition. He's a pompous dinosaur, but he's very good at what he does. They're taking up to 250 Syndrome children and their families and moving them out to G889. Sergei and I are going."

"And, let me guess. You need a pilot," Alonzo grinned.

"Well, two of them, to be precise. One for the Colony ship, and the other for the smaller, more powerful Advance ship. I considered re-activating my flight status so I could be one of the pilots, but my place is with Sergei not on the flight deck. And, I can't think of anyone more qualified for this job than you, Alonzo."

"Why all of the secrecy? Why couldn't you just go through official channels? I mean, you work in Dispatch. You could pull a few strings..."

"Because this expedition is very unpopular in high places," she whispered. "The Council wants them to fail. Any pilot who has displayed interest in this mission was told that it would be the last time that they would ever fly. As for O'Neill, he's such an ass that he doesn't care what the Council thinks. He's practically daring them to take him on."

"The Guild intimidating its own pilots for the Council? Don't tell me that you're turning into one of those conspiracy nuts, Marisa!"

"It's not a conspiracy! It's the truth! I've seen it myself. Think of how many people we know that are qualified for distances over ten light-years. None of them took the job. The only ones that I have left to talk to are you and Sheila."

Alonzo reconsidered as he took another bite of his fettucine. "You know, I've always wanted to go farther than anyone else. I'd want to know a lot more about this little expedition before I sign on, though. How much are they paying, for instance?"

"Three times the normal Guild rate for trips over ten light-years," Marisa said levelly.

Alonzo choked on his pasta. "You're kidding, right? They're paying two pilots that amount, and not getting any nibbles? Something is definitely wrong with this picture. I dunno, Marisa. I mean, as tempting as the offer sounds, I need some more information about this crazy expedition."

"I thought you'd say that, 'Lonzo," she replied. "After lunch, there's some people that I want you to meet."

Alonzo sighed. "I can hardly wait," he smirked.

After lunch - which Alonzo paid for - he found himself riding a lift with Marisa to level ten. As soon as he got off the lift, he smelled antiseptic and over-oxygenated air. It was a medical facility, naturally. The haggard Oriental woman receptionist gave him the evil eye as Marisa led him past her station. However, the clerk recognized Marisa and waved them through.

"She probably thinks you're another doctor," Marisa giggled.

"Hardly," Alonzo answered while looking around. Paper with childrens' drawings lined the corridors, as did cartoon character posters and teddy bears. No matter that real bears had been extinct for over a century - teddy bears were still popular with kids. Some things never changed.

Marisa led him to a room marked "Special Research Facility 36E". "Welcome to the Syndrome ward," Marisa announced, then swiped her keycard into the reader. The door clicked open, and they walked inside.

They had walked into a common area, which was ringed by various smaller rooms. The walls were institutional green, with drawings and cartoons on the walls. One wall near the nurses' station had holopictures lined up against it, with the title "Angels Among Us" on the top. None of the kids were older than ten years old. It gave Alonzo the creeps. Across the room, three young boys were playing a VR game. They were dressed in identical exoskeletons. Marisa had explained on the way over that the immuno-suits were the life-support systems for the Syndrome kids. One boy had bright golden hair and seemed to be a self-important little brat. The second boy, a towhead, was fighting for his turn. The third boy, who had curly light-brown hair, was talking incessantly about some fanciful idea that made absolutely no sense. Marisa grinned at the three of them and called out, "Seryozha, Mama's here!"

The towheaded boy pulled off his VR gear and smiled eagerly. Once Sergei had the gear off, Alonzo could see the resemblance between Marisa and her son. Both of them had the high Slavic cheekbones and pointed nose. The boy toddled over to his mother as quickly as possible in an immuno-suit. Marisa got down on one knee and gave him a big, motherly hug. The other two boys, meanwhile, were sizing up Alonzo.

The curly-headed boy regarded him with wise, otherworldly eyes as he walked toward Alonzo. "Are you really a pilot, like Sergei's mom?" he asked.

"Yes, I am," Alonzo confirmed.

"Wow, cool! Have you been to a lot of other planets? Where have you been? Have you seen any monsters? What about aliens?" The curly-haired boy fired questions at him faster than he could answer.

"Oh, don't be a dope," the golden-haired boy snapped at his companion. "It's not like Captain Galaxy. All he's seen is the cockpit of a freighter," he sneered. Alonzo guessed that this little

snot was the Adair kid that Marisa had told him about.

"Cut it out," Curly shot back, clearly able to defend himself. "Captain Galaxy rules!" Curly took a fighting stance, as if to defend the honor of his favorite superhero.

"Boys!" Marisa snapped out. "Be nice in front of my friend." She turned back to her son. "Sergei, this is my friend Alonzo Solace. Alonzo, this is my son Sergei Mikhailovich Ivanov. His friends here are Maxwell Taggart and Ulysses Adair." To Alonzo's surprise, the curly-headed kid, not the bossy one, was the Adair boy.

"Hello," Sergei smiled, and Alonzo again saw the remarkable resemblance to his mother. "Are you my mom's boyfriend?" Alonzo gulped at the boy's abrupt question, and looked over at Marisa. She blushed crimson.

"No, I'm just an old friend," Alonzo replied, then grinned. "I can be your mom's boyfriend, if she'd let me."

Sergei looked up at him. "Nah, you'd probably leave us, just like Dad did."

Alonzo didn't think it was possible, but he actually blushed. Meanwhile, the other two boys were watching him with amusement. Curly...er... Ulysses looked up at him with his spooky gray eyes for a moment, then smiled.

"Are you gonna fly us to our new home?" the Adair boy asked. "Have you ever been there? Yale said that it was really far away. What's cold-sleep like?" Alonzo couldn't keep up with his rapid-fire questions.

Fortunately, he was saved by the appearance of a slim young woman doctor with blonde hair and piercing blue eyes. She had a white coat on with a caduceus symbol on the side, signifying her rank as a Council physician. The doctor looked at Marisa, then him, then at the boys who were peppering him with questions. She looked back up at Alonzo, and he smiled his best lady-killer smile. He got no reaction from the doctor.

"Boys," the young woman interrupted her charges, "come here a minute, please?" The boys clustered over to her. "I have some bad news for you."

"Don't tell me, Doctor Julia," the third boy, Max, spoke up in a bored tone of voice. "Someone else died."

The doctor sighed in resignation. "I'm afraid so. Kenny McCormick was taken to the ICU an hour ago, and died a few minutes later. I'm sorry, boys. I know that he was your friend." Tears shone in Sergei and Uly's eyes, but Max was stony and determined not to cry. "If you want to talk about it..." the doctor began.

"No! I don't want to talk about it!" Max lashed out. "I want to be like other kids! I'm tired of this stupid immuno-suit! I want to be able to run, play soccer, and do other things that normal kids do!" He started getting over-excited, then he started wheezing. The pretty doctor immediately produced a ventilator from the pocket of her white coat, and put it to Max's mouth. He breathed into it a few times, and

the gasping slowed. Alonzo exchanged a look with Marisa.

"It never gets any easier," the ex-pilot sighed. "I've lost count of how many friends Sergei has lost in the past four years. I know that someday it will be my son's turn. And that, Alonzo, is why I want to take him away from here. If there's the slightest chance that he'll survive, I'll take it." She turned toward him, and he pulled her into his arms. Marisa clung to him and cried, as the doctor looked up at them with a wistful expression in her blue eyes that spoke volumes. Then, she reached out and took a crying Uly Adair into her arms. Max just stood there, defiantly trying not to hyperventilate - but not grieving one bit.

NorthAm 14 Station, 1600 hours

If Alonzo had thought that the Spacing Guild's lobby was opulent, the lobby of the Adair Design Corporation on the top level of NorthAm 14 was positively palatial. The entire level was wallpapered in muted earth tones. Various portraits and landscapes were hung strategically on the walls. Alonzo thought he recognized a few priceless Monets and Picassos among with more modern works. From the corner to his left, he heard water running. Half-expecting to find a leaking bathroom unit, he turned. The running water was actually a small fountain! He'd heard about such things - Mama would always tell him about the famous Trevi fountain in Rome - but he hardly expected to see such an extravagant use of water in an office.

As he was marvelling over the fountain, a smartly-dressed brunette approached him with a datapad in her hand and a Gear set over her shoulder-length hair. "Do you have an appointment, sir?" she queried.

"I sure do," he responded, flashing a grin. The secretary was impervious. "My name is Alonzo Solace. I have an appointment at 1630 to see Devon Adair."

The secretary checked her datapad. "Ah, yes, Mr. Solace. I believe that our Guild Liaison, Ms. Ivanova, made your appointment. Unfortunately, Ms. Adair is unavailable. Your interview will be with Commander O'Neill."

"Oh," Alonzo frowned. "I was under the impression that I would be speaking to Ms. Adair personally."

"Perhaps you will, if the level five clearance meeting breaks up on time," she sighed. "However, the chances of the meeting ending on time are slim to none."

Meetings - another reason that he sought to escape the mundane life on the stations as much as possible. "All right," he assented. "Which way to Commander O'Neill's office?"

"To the right, all the way at the end of the hall. Room 1256." Alonzo nodded his thanks, and made a beeline for the corridor. "Oh, Mr. Solace," the secretary called after him, "this journey is very important to Ms. Adair. I hope things work out."

"Thanks." _I guess I've still got the touch,_ he thought as he walked down the corridor.

Alonzo reached room 1256 within a few minutes. He pressed the door chime to be admitted, and the door clicked open. He walked inside. Surprisingly enough, there was no secretary. Just a portly older man with gray hair and mustache. Blueprints for space vessels were tacked up all over the walls. His desk was tidy in a military fashion. Behind the desk, in a wooden frame, were two old-style firearms. Below them hung an ornate curved sword.

"Solace?" The older man asked. "Commander Broderick O'Neill. Pleased to meet you." The man reached across the desk and shook his hand. The man had a vise-like grip. "Nice of you to come by on such short notice. When Marisa told me about you, I knew that I had to talk to you right away before someone else hired you out."

"Well, no offers yet. I've barely had enough time to unpack. Just getting acclimated with Station life after eight years is a challenge."

"How'd you like to be away from the Stations longer? I suppose that Marisa's told you about our excursion to G889."

"A little. I do know that it's farther out than any of our other colonies. Nobody's been out that way for years. Council probes found it, and there was one freighter that came out of near-luminal way past their mark. Its uncharted territory."

"Does that interest you?" O'Neill peered at him curiously through his beady eyes.

"To be honest, yes. I'm the best pilot in the Guild -- although Sheila Willis might take exception to that. I've flown into areas that were uncharted before. In fact, I mapped the routes that other pilots are flying now. There is one small matter, though."

"What's that?" O'Neill looked down at a pad on his desk.

"The payment rate. I understand that you're paying three times the normal Guild rate."

"Of course."

"And you haven't had any pilots take your offer?"

"The damned Council keeps scaring them off."

"And well they should," Alonzo cautioned. "This is a risky trip for everyone. Very few people have been in cryo for that long. And they were healthy adults, not sick kids. You want me to fly your ship, you've gotta pay."

"Greedy bastard," O'Neill cursed.

"You get what you pay for," Alonzo grinned affably.

"Wait a second while I contact Ms. Adair," he said as he engaged his Gear eyepiece. "Dev? Could you come down here for a moment?" The person on the other end of the link responded. "Well, tell that damned government jerk to shut up and leave." More silence. "I have a pilot here who's interested in our vacancy. However, there's a little matter of his price." Silence again. The person on the other end was

not happy. "Okay. O'Neill out." He flipped his eyepiece back around. "Devon's on her way down. Truth is, she was looking for a way to get out of that meeting. The Government liaison, Martin, is a total waste of oxygen."

"Most Government types are," Alonzo observed.

O'Neill chuckled, his gut shaking. "I think we're gonna get along just great, Ace," he grinned and stood. "Come here, I'll show you the design for our ships." Alonzo stood and followed him to the wall on his right. "Here's the Advance ship. That's the one you'll be piloting."

"I take it this means I've got the job," Alonzo cut in.

"Pending Devon's approval. Although, I don't see as we have much of a choice," O'Neill answered. "Anyway, this is the Advance ship, the Roanoke. Titanium hull, three levels, Siemens cryo-chambers, top of the line. She'll carry a complement of about sixty - most of whom are flight and operations crew. The communications array and sixteen cargo pods are attached externally for easier jettison upon arrival in orbit."

"What kind of engines?"

"Pratt and Whitney near-luminal superconductors. The very latest design. In fact, they've built them specifically for us."

"What about the Colony ship?" Alonzo asked.

"It's been dubbed the Jamestown. Colony has space to accommodate 1100 in cold-sleep. Same type of drive system. Although, it'll be a lot slower because of its heavier mass."

Alonzo remembered his recent adventure with the Eridani, and suppressed a smile. "I would expect so. How do we get the passengers on-planet?"

"Jamestown's got five VTO aircraft that will ferry down the passengers and cargo, as opposed to the one on Roanoke. Four of the VTO's will stay on-planet after Jamestown departs."

"Makes sense," Alonzo confirmed. "When's your departure date?"

"That's the problem," a husky female voice said from the doorway. Alonzo turned to see a beautiful, dark-haired woman wearing a gold and black jumpsuit and a Gear set over her head. Her hair was pulled back into a bun. Her steel-gray eyes were similar to the ones on the boy he'd met earlier in the day. Clearly, she was his mother. She was a handsome woman, but Alonzo knew instinctively that any pass made at her would go nowhere.

"Devon, I'd like you to meet Alonzo Solace," O'Neill introduced them. "He's Marisa Ivanova's friend," the older man put special emphasis on the word "friend."

Adair's right eyebrow shot up in a quizzical look. "So, you're the pilot that thinks that three times the going rate isn't enough?" She asked brusquely.

"Well, Ms. Adair," Alonzo began, "you're talking about a very dangerous trip with some very precious cargo. I've met your son. He's a nice kid. It seems to me that you'd do anything to protect him."

Devon's gaze turned steely. "Don't you dare raise the issue of my son to me. All I want you to do is to fly the ship, drop us off, and leave. My son stands a far better chance of survival in cold-sleep than he does on these Stations."

Alonzo gulped. "I didn't mean to offend you. I was just telling Commander O'Neill that your expedition is into uncharted territory. I'm one of the few pilots around that have flown extended missions like this. So, it'll cost you."

Devon looked him up and down. Alonzo got the impression that he was being evaluated. "Broderick, pay him and his crew four times the Guild rate. Authorize it for the crew of the Colony ship, too, when they come on board." She turned back to address Alonzo. "You're right, Mr. Solace. We have no alternatives. Mr. Martin assures us that our Level Five clearance is a go as of next week. That means that we only have one more mountain of bureaucracy to climb before we go. We need a Pilot of Record. I need the best the Guild has to offer, and that's you." She extended her hand to him. "Welcome aboard the Eden Project, Mr. Solace."

Stargazer's Bar, 2000 hours.

Alonzo sat at a round table in one of the private rooms in the back of Stargazer's. The room was one where various people could conduct private business without fear of listening devices. A faint smell of illegal tobacco clung to the furniture. Around the table sat Baines, Jenna, Marisa, Sheila and her two crewmates - the petite Hindu navigator, Lakshmi Vranapurda and the Oriental ops-tech, Sam Nakemura. Marisa and Alonzo were explaining the details of the Adair expedition. His tablemates looked skeptical, to say the least.

"So, 'Lonz," Sheila began, "you're telling me that this Adair woman is paying through the nose for two crews to take her to uncharted space? Is she filthy rich or just crazy?"

"Both," Alonzo answer the fact that the Council is scaring people off of this job. Maybe they know something?"

"I'm sure they do," Marisa countered. "They know a lot about that planet that they're not telling Devon. She doesn't know the signs, but I do. I think that the Council is afraid of letting people outside of their control."

"But they're sending a liaison with them," Sheila chimed in.

"I'm willing to bet that he's an expendable minor bureaucrat with no official power," Alonzo guessed. "At least that's what Adair seemed to think."

"Frankly," Lakshmi, Sheila's quiet navigator, spoke up, "I think that it is a good idea, even if there is the odor of the Council about it. There's more here than just the adventure or the credits. It's helping a bunch of sick children. We in the Guild have been blessed

with steady jobs, high pay, and prestige. We work hard for it, but there are a lot of others on the Stations who work just as hard for less pay. It's time that we gave something back." Everyone stared at Lakshmi as she spoke. The tablemates were silent, as everyone considered their positions.

"Laksh's right," Sheila agreed. "I'm in. Sam, what about you?" she asked her ops-tech.

"Hey, I'm just flattered that they thought we were the best," he answered. "Lead the way, Sheila. You know I always go whichever way you and Laksh point the ship."

"Okay, you three will be on the Jamestown," Marisa smiled and said. "I'd put you on the Advance ship, but Commander O'Neill has already assigned Alonzo to the Roanoke."

Alonzo looked at his crew. "Jenna? Baines? Are you in, or do I shop for a new crew?"

The dark-skinned navigator looked from Alonzo to Jenna, then back to Alonzo. "I hate to break up the best team in the Guild, man. I don't like it, but I'm in. Besides, the money helps a lot, right Sam?." He looked at his counterpart on the other team, who tilted his glass back at Baines in response.

"Jenna?" Alonzo asked.

His navigator hesitated. "I don't know, Alonzo. I really wanted some time off. But, if you're going into uncharted territory, you'll want me with you. Someone's got to make sure you don't follow your bollocks and get us lost," she grinned.

"Then we're set," Marisa smiled. "Thank you all for taking this risk. You won't be disappointed. This is going to be something big, I know it."

"I just hope that we get back alive," Baines responded half-jokingly.

The crew had said their farewells, and adjourned to pursue other entertainment. Alonzo and Marisa looked at each other across the table. He grinned knowingly, and she responded with a wry smile. "So, can I walk you back to your unit?" he asked.

"You never change, Alonzo," Marisa laughed.

"I'm not around long enough to change," he shot back.

Marisa stood, and Alonzo followed her lead. "Stewart is right. You are a legend in your own mind!"

Alonzo grinned even harder. "And everyone else's ... what can I say?"

"How about 'let's go,'" Marisa shot back as she made her way toward the door.

"I don't like pushy women," he joked as they walked out of the bar.

"Alonzo, I don't think there's any woman in the galaxy that you don't like. Even if she's got green, scaly skin and tentacles for arms."

"How did you know what my last date looked like?" he laughed, and she joined him.

They were interrupted by the crackling voice of an older woman calling to them from the edge of the corridor. "Such a lovely couple! Would you like your fortunes read?" Alonzo and Marisa turned to see an elderly woman dressed in black. Her face was lined like a raisin, and her hair was solid gray and turned up in a bun. She was sitting behind a table with a stack of cards and a sign that read **SEE YOUR FUTURE - 25 CREDITS**. She reminded Alonzo of his long-dead mother. She'd also read cards, and was the first to encourage him to seek his fortune in the stars.

"Sure, Grandma," he replied, more on instinct than anything else.

"Alonzo, this is just hocus-pocus," Marisa tried to pull him away, but he sat down in front of the booth anyway.

"Come on, Marisa, live a little," he replied. "Besides, I have the credits to spare." He placed his thumb on the old woman's scanner, she punched in a few numbers, and a light switched from red to green. The funds had been transferred to the woman's account.

"Thank you, young man. Maybe not so young," the woman chuckled. "You're a pilot?"

"She's amazing, Alonzo!" Marisa snorted sarcastically. "She's psychic!"

"Just an observer of people, young lady. You have a Pilot First Class patch on your jacket, which by the way, is real leather. The Guild hasn't issued leather flight jackets for at least 50 years. And you, my dear, are envious of what he has, and what you gave up for love," the old woman smiled. Marisa's sarcastic grin disappeared from her face and she fumed. "Now, my friend, shuffle these cards. Consider whatever you would like to know about." Alonzo did as he was told, then automatically divided them into three piles. The old woman looked surprised. "You've done this before?" she asked.

"My mother read cards," Alonzo answered. "Some people thought that she was a _strega_, a witch."

The fortune-teller chuckled. "I haven't heard that term in a good many years. Now, to your reading." She pulled out a card with a blond man holding a thick branch. "You are the knight of Rods - always charging forward, exploring." She placed the card in front of him, and dealt ten cards. "This covers you, this crosses you, this above you, this is below you, this is behind you, this is before you. This is you, this is your environment, this is your hope, and this is the outcome."

"What does this all mean?" Marisa asked.

"Don't rush me, young lady," the woman snapped, and turned her attention back to the cards on the table. "The card that covers you is the Chariot. You think that you're the master of your destiny, but there are forces at work that you cannot control."

"The card that crosses you is the Three of Cups reversed. You have a strong desire for pleasure and excess. You are living a superfluous life, or at least you think you are."

"Hey! That's not true!" Alonzo exclaimed.

"Maybe you don't think so with your head, but your heart knows better. Now the card above you, which indicates the question, is the Six of Swords. You will be taking a journey soon."

"Gee, that's obvious," Marisa snorted. The fortune-teller glared at her, and she quieted.

"Now the fourth card, the one below you, is the foundation of the question. You have the Six of Cups, which means that you're longing for something. You have memories of the past, but they are fading. In the past, you have the Knight of Swords reversed. You've been impulsive, often following your heart - or other body parts."

"I think I know which other body part you mean," Alonzo grinned ruefully.

"In your future," the woman continued, "is the Tower. It indicates sudden change or upheaval, a turn for the worse."

"That doesn't sound too good," Alonzo interjected.

"It won't seem that way at the time, but it will change. Over here, after this sudden change, you have the Hanged Man. He symbolizes the discovery of gifts you never knew you had. He is undergoing a trial in order to gain wisdom. In your environment, you have the Queen of Swords. She's a sharp-witted, intelligent woman who is very lonely."

"Sounds like my type."

"Does she have green skin and tentacles?" Marisa interjected. Alonzo gave her a friendly whack on the butt in response.

"In your hopes and fears, you have the Star. She symbolizes spiritual growth. And the outcome is the Magician. He symbolizes mastery of the elements and inner confidence. It is a very powerful reading, my friend. I don't often see this many trump cards in a reading. Fate is weaving a strange cloth for you. Remember this, and you will survive to see the outcome."

Alonzo paused, and looked closely at her. Damned if she didn't look like his mother. He started to ask her name, but thought better of it. "Thank you, grandma."

"Good luck, young ones. I wish you well in your endeavors," the woman replied. "Safe journey. You'll need it..."

Alonzo and Marisa walked and reminisced, and gradually made their way to her unit in a lower section of NorthAm One. It was a rather cramped section, filled with mid-level Guild bureaucrats making their way down the halls to their private quarters. Marisa pressed her palm to the sensor on the wall, and the door slid open with a whoosh.

"Pardon the mess," she apologized. "I didn't really expect to have company tonight."

"What mess?" he joked as he looked around. Scattered on the shelves were pictures of Sergei at various ages, various datapads, and toys. On the wall in one corner sat an Orthodox cross and an icon of the Virgin Mary. The welcoming smell of tea emanated from a blue enamel samovar on the coffee table. It was cluttered, but not messy. Not like living with cargo handlers. "I don't see any mess here. Except for you."

Alonzo surprised her by leaning in to kiss her. Marisa put her arms around his neck and returned the kiss tentatively at first, but then with more insistence. His hand moved down her back and rested on her spandex-clad bottom. Things were going splendidly.

Marisa suddenly stiffened and pushed him away. "No, Alonzo, I can't do this."

He looked at her, stunned. "What?"

"I said that we can't do this. Sergei..."

"... is spending the night on the Syndrome Ward. You told me that earlier."

"No, that's not it. I mean... I can't do this."

Alonzo was puzzled. "Marisa, we've been lovers before. We were really good together back in flight school. What's changed?"

She pulled out of his embrace and took a step back. "You don't get it, do you?"

He shook his head. "What? I don't get what?"

Her blue-green eyes met his. "When I said earlier that you haven't changed, I was only half-joking."

"This is about me?" He looked confused.

"Not entirely," she took a breath. "Alonzo, you haven't changed. You're still the cocky, arrogant, devil-may-care flyboy that you were eighty years ago. You defrost, hang out long enough to get a new job, then back into cryo for another few years. No responsibilities..."

"Except to the Guild and my crew," he interrupted.

"That's not the same. Yes, you have responsibilities. I'm not saying that you don't. However, I've changed. I'm not a pilot anymore! I've been someone's wife. I'm a mother."

"Sergei likes me, you saw him."

"You still don't understand!" she snapped. "I don't want a one-night stand anymore. I want someone permanent in my life. Dammit, Alonzo, I'm watching my son die! I can't get involved in with anyone, much less someone who thinks the universe revolves around him!"

Alonzo stood, stunned speechless. He didn't know what to think. "I'm sorry, Marisa," he stammered. "I didn't realize..."

She smiled wanly. "I could love you very easily, old friend. That's why I can't let this happen," she walked over to the table and picked up a picture of her son. "We're going off to a whole new life. By the time we get there, you'll be on your way back. I only hope that someday you'll realize what I do, that life is more than just hopping from job to job and bed to bed. Now, I think you'd better go. I have a meeting in the morning." She walked toward the door and showed him the way out.

"G'night, Marisa," he said, and kissed her on the cheek. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Good night, Alonzo," she replied, then the door schussed closed. Alonzo put his head against the wall in frustration, then turned and walked toward the lift.

7 December, 0700 Station Time

Alonzo awakened alone in his own bed the next morning. It was not something that happened all too often when he was on the Stations. He rolled over and looked at the time. "Great," he muttered as he ran his fingers through his hair. "I've got enough time to work out. Work some of this tension off, anyway," he said aloud. He was used to other ways of relieving tension. He rolled out of bed and pulled a pair of drawstring pants and a collared shirt out of his closet. Good enough for going to the gym. He pulled a pair of shorts and a t-shirt out of his drawer, pulled on his socks and shoes, and headed down to Level 10, section Delta.

The Guild athletic facility was, like everything else associated with them, first-rate. Alonzo was always amazed at the latest designs in fitness equipment. The latest trend was low-gee exercising. It was supposed to be non-impact. Like these sedentary Station-dwellers would know anything about moving around in low gravity. He opted for the more traditional free weights. Pushing his body to the limits of his strength and endurance was almost as much of a rush for Alonzo as flying was.

As he lifted, his thoughts drifted back to Devon Adair and the crazy job that he'd just signed on for. Maybe he was wrong about this whole thing. The money was attractive. Not to mention the thought of flying farther than any other Guild pilot had gone. However, the encounter with the fortune-teller last night had planted a worry in the back of his mind, a worry that he'd gotten in way over his head. Not to mention leading Baines, Jenna, Sheila and her crew into the same mess. He couldn't afford any doubts now. Marisa had probably informed Adair and O'Neill of the outcome of last night's meeting. O'Neill was probably filing the papers this very minute. Alonzo decided that the best thing to do was to let Devon Adair and Broderick O'Neill sweat

the details.

That wasn't to be the case. When Alonzo returned from the gym, he found a message from Marisa on his avatar. The sight of her face after last night's failure brought back all of the tension that he'd worked off in the gym.

"Alonzo, we've got a problem," Marisa said in her message. "The Chairman of the Guild, Jacques LaPointe, just vetoed Adair's Level Five clearance application. He refuses to sign off on you and Sheila as pilots of record for Eden Project."

"What the...?" Alonzo shouted at the avatar screen.

"He wants to see all of us - you, Sheila, your crews, and the Adair crowd in his office at 1100 hours today. 'Lonz, this is really important. Eden Project won't get off the Stations if we can't persuade him to grant our clearance. I'll see you at 1100. Ivanova out."

"Shank it!" Alonzo cursed as he looked at the time. It was 1000. It was a good thing that he'd showered after his workout. He quickly changed into the most business-like clothing that he owned. It was still woefully inadequate for a meeting with the Chairman, but it would have to do.

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The elevator door opened at the top level of Guild Headquarters - the Executive Suite. Guild Headquarters was at the very top of the central core of the wheel-like space station, so that the windows had a commanding view of the stars. It was designed to impress and humble anyone who ventured up to such lofty heights. Alonzo had been in the Executive Suite once before, during his promotion to Pilot First Class fifty years ago. He was being honored for being the first pilot to chart the route to Wolf 359. He doubted very much that his second visit to the Executive Suite would be as much of a positive experience.

A trim, efficient Asian woman sat at the reception desk. Alonzo gave her his name, and she directed him toward the conference room. Alonzo entered the room to find Marisa, Sheila, O'Neill, and Devon Adair already seated around a highly-polished antique wooden conference table. Another man that Alonzo didn't recognize was also seated at the table. Devon gave him a warm smile as he sat in an empty chair between Marisa and Sheila. Then, Adair turned to the other men at the table. Her friendly smile vanished, and she became all business.

"This is our pilot, Alonzo Solace," she introduced him with an emphasis on the word our. "Alonzo, this is Morgan Martin, the Under-Secretary for Interstellar Development assigned to the Eden Project." Martin was lanky, with long brown hair in a ponytail, and a small earring in his left ear. He was wearing a suit that was probably too expensive for a mid-level bureaucrat, but he still managed to look geeky in it. Martin nodded imperceptively. Alonzo remembered O'Neill's comments about the bureaucrat's worth from yesterday, and was inclined to agree.

The door to an inner office opened and a stocky, bald black man in an

expensive pinstripe suit entered the room, followed by the Asian secretary. As he entered, the bureaucrat's demeanor changed from self-importance to submissiveness. This gentleman must be the new Guild president, LaPointe.

"Devon," LaPointe greeted her as he sat at the head of the table. The secretary sat as his right, datapad in hand.

"Jacques," Devon responded and looked toward him and Sheila. "This is Alonzo Solace and Sheila Willis."

LaPointe smiled broadly at his two employees. "I'm pleased to finally meet our two best pilots in person," he said. Alonzo supposed that LaPointe had studied his and Sheila's personnel files thoroughly. "I don't believe in wasting time on small talk, as you well know. So, I'll get right to the point. I cannot allow our two most profitable pilots to take your job."

Devon stiffened. "So, this is about money, Jacques? Or is it something else?" She retorted as she stared at Martin.

"Absolutely not," LaPointe answered. "I'm sure that you can do the math as well as I can. Solace will be out of commission for forty-four years. Willis will be gone longer. In that time, they could do five runs to closer colonies. That's a total of ten residuals for the Guild, as compared to two - a net loss of four apiece."

"I don't see that as being a problem. I'm already paying them four times the standard rate for distances over ten light years," Devon informed him. "You want five times the standard to compensate for the residuals lost? I can do that."

"We need people that have flown into uncharted territory," O'Neill chimed in. "Solace and Willis are the best you have to offer."

Martin piped up. "You need to understand the Council's position, Devon. We are concerned for your safety, and the safety of the colonists that come after you."

Devon stared at him. "Believe me, safety is our top priority, Morgan. We're transporting over 250 sick children, including my son. If these two pilots are the best that the Guild has to offer, I want them." Martin gave her an evil stare, but Devon stood her ground.

"Safety isn't really an issue, at least not with the Guild," LaPointe contradicted Martin, much to the bureaucrat's dismay. "We trust that our pilots will safely deliver you and your colony to G889. However, I cannot allow the loss of revenue caused by losing two of our best for a long period of time."

Marisa leaned over and whispered in Alonzo's ear. "He knows something that we don't," she observed. "And Martin knows it, too, the bastard."

Alonzo narrowed his eyes and looked at the bureaucrat. "Nah, he's just the Council stooge who's in way over his head," he whispered back to her.

Devon whispered something to O'Neill, who nodded. She then turned to stare at the Guild President. "Jacques," she addressed him, "If the Guild insists on stonewalling this project, we will simply have to go around you."

"Devon!" Martin warned. He was wide-eyed with shock.

She waved him silent, and continued to stare at LaPointe, who remained stone-faced. "What do you mean, Ms. Adair?"

"If the Guild doesn't want to accept our choice, then we will go outside of the Guild."

LaPointe smirked. "That's impossible. There are no licensed pilots outside of the Guild."

"Because pilots have no other choice!" Devon retorted. "What if they did, Jacques? What if the Adair Corporation were to accredit pilots for itself? With higher standards than the Guild's, which would be considered an honor to achieve? Not to mention higher pay? How many of your people would leave you high and dry if they knew that Adair Design was funding them? I'd be willing to guess that they'd be leaving in droves. So we'd get all of your best pilots, for as long as we'd want them, instead of two for a few decades."

"Devon, do you know what you're saying?" Martin adjusted his tie and asked nervously.

"Martin, if you don't have anything constructive to say, shut up," O'Neill retorted.

"I know exactly what I'm saying, Morgan. I'm saying that Adair Design will hire our own pilots. In other words, the Guild's monopoly on inter-stellar travel will be broken."

Alonzo exchanged alarmed looks with the others at the table. Sheila was looking at Devon warily, like she was wondering what kind of crazy woman they'd signed on with. Marisa looked like she was going to laugh hysterically. The bureaucrat, Martin, looked like he was about to need a clean pair of pants. "Oh, my God," Martin whispered and stared wide-eyed at Devon.

By contrast, O'Neill seemed to be observing the scene from light-years away, with an emphasis on the years. Except for the fingers on one hand, he was entirely still. Alonzo hadn't seen him reach into a pocket, but somehow, from out of nowhere, O'Neill had produced a small object. A penny, if Alonzo wasn't mistaken. Which O'Neill was idly flipping across the knuckles of his hand, not in a pattern, but apparently not randomly either. Perhaps he was spelling out a binary message in rights and lefts instead of 1's and 0's. If so, it was some kind of feral message only he knew how to read. It was white-collar voodoo, stranger than the NorthAm 1 fortune-teller Â- and far more potentially violent.

LaPointe arched his eyebrow, but displayed no other emotion. "You are more insane than I've heard," LaPointe said quietly. "That is an idle threat, Ms. Adair."

"I don't do business that way, LaPointe. Try me and find out if it's an idle threat."

"Sir, if I may," Alonzo spoke up. Every person in the room immediately focused on him, if only to give them something else to focus on besides Adair's threat. "Willis and I have discussed this with our teams. The decision was unanimous that we would take this job. There were some reservations, but all six of us felt that the Eden Project deserved the best. We are ready and willing to go, pending your approval."

LaPointe looked from him to Sheila to confirm what Alonzo had said. The redheaded pilot nodded seriously. He paused, then looked again at Devon Adair. "If my top pilots have assessed the mission and are willing to waste their talents on it, I believe that we should trust their judgement. However, Ms. Adair, remember this: the Guild will NOT be threatened, by you or anyone else. You may have your flight crews, on one condition. Adair Design will pay double the normal rate for any Guild services for the next fifty years, in order to make up for Willis and Solace's loss of commission. Take it or leave it." He folded his arms across his chest and looked down his nose at Devon.

Devon conferred in whispered tones with O'Neill, then looked up. "You have a deal, Mr. LaPointe. I will have my assistant draw up the contract and leave instructions with our transportation division."

"Very good, Ms. Adair," he stood, reached across the table, and extended his right hand. "I will approve Willis and Solace as your pilots of record as of today."

Devon reached over and shook LaPointe's hand firmly. As they stood, O'Neill, then Martin also shook the Chairman's hand, then all three of them left the room. Marisa, Sheila and Alonzo were left alone with their boss, who did not look pleased.

"Solace, Willis," he asked, "Are you sure about this?"

"Sir, I believe that I made myself clear earlier," Alonzo said. "We discussed it last night, and we're willing to go." Sheila nodded in agreement.

"Then go. But beware. If either of you want out, don't hesitate to let me know. This trip of Adair's is going to be more dangerous than anyone realizes." With those words, he turned on his heel and walked out, leaving Marisa and the two pilots looking at each other skeptically.

21 December, NorthAm 3 spacedock

The next few weeks were a whirlwind of activity. Alonzo, Sheila and their crews spent their time practicing in the Guild's simulators, since the actual cockpits of Roanoke and Jamestown were still under construction. The plan was fairly simple - Roanoke would dock with Jamestown and use their combined power until they passed outside of lunar orbit. The two ships would then separate. Alonzo and Sheila argued for separation on the other side of the asteroid belt, so that Jamestown's larger gravity well could shield Roanoke from damage. However, O'Neill surprised him by redesigning Roanoke's shields to double their range. Alonzo discussed this feature at length with the designers, and he was satisfied that it would work.

On the other side, Alonzo and his crew would approach G889, use the planet's gravity to brake the ship's forward velocity, deploy a communications array, then drop the cargo pods. The passengers would then depart on the VTO aircraft. Alonzo and his crew would boomerang around the star and use the push to head home. That part of the mission was standard operating procedure. He didn't foresee any problems, provided that their navigational data was on-target. Once the comm dish reached the surface, it would broadcast a signal to the _Jamestown_, which would adjust its course to head straight for G889.

When he wasn't in the simulators or in meetings, Alonzo spent most of his time at Stargazers. He barely saw Marisa anymore. He wasn't sure if that was because she was busy or if she was avoiding him. Not that it mattered. She was right. There was too much history between them to just let it be a one-night stand, and neither of them could afford that right now.

Besides, the ladies at Stargazers were beautiful and accommodating. Women that worked in the Guild had heard of his legendary exploits and were eager to see if the stories about him were true. As usual, Alonzo had a different woman in his bed every night. Baines was getting his fair share of interest as well. However, Jenna seemed to be spending most of her off time with Sheila Willis's crew. He didn't think much of it. Since the two crews would be working together at least as far as the Belt, they should become as closely acquainted as possible.

Finally, about three weeks before their departure date, O'Neill gave him permission to check out the _Roanoke_'s flight deck for himself. That section was still under construction, but it was safe enough to be in the area without a hardhat or shielding. Alonzo rode the elevator up to the flight deck with the anticipation of a child on Christmas morning. After weeks of VR and studying design schematics, he was finally going to get a look at the real thing! He stepped off the elevator and looked around, making a mental comparison with the blueprints.

"Okay, there's the head..." he glanced at the small toilet area to his left. "Nav position, Ops command center..." then he saw the forward-facing seat. "Ahhh, here we are!" He sat in the waiting chair and spun once. He came to a stop facing forward. He caressed the controls as he would a beautiful woman. "Adair spared no expense on this baby!" He fiddled with a few switches and dials. "Beautiful, responsive..." He grinned as he visualized this sleek ship going through the Asteroid Belt.

"Should I leave you two alone?" a muffled growl of a voice came from behind him. Alonzo jumped in his seat and spun around. A man's head, with a mop of sandy brown hair, was hanging down from a trapdoor in the deck's ceiling. Wires stretched from a spool on the deck upward into the trapdoor. "She's hot, but I hear that she runs with a fast crowd," the man joked.

Alonzo grinned in response. "That's just how I like 'em!" he bantered back. The tech's head disappeared for a moment, then he landed feet-first on the deck with a thud. Alonzo and the tech looked each other over. He was a big guy, wearing cargo pants and a navy Ops crew vest with the ship's callsign, VA-1587, on the front panel. Under the vest was a dirt-smeared, multi-colored shirt that re-defined the word

"tacky". His face was caked with grime and sweat, but seemed honest. "Alonzo Solace, pilot," Alonzo said as he held out his hand to introduce himself.

"John Danziger, Ops Chief," the tech replied and shook his hand heartily. Alonzo realized he'd scored immediate points by being willing to shake a work-stained hand - some pilots wouldn't. "So, you're the hotshot that Adair spent all that money on? You'd better be worth it," he grumbled good-naturedly.

"I'm the best there is," he bragged. "Flew the first Wolf 359 run back in '50. One of the few Pilots rated for over ten light-years."

Danziger eyed him warily. "You charted Wolf 359? I've been there once. Tough work."

"Yeah," Alonzo agreed. "So, what do you make of this?"

"The ship? She's a beauty, all right."

"No, I meant this whole Eden Project thing," Alonzo said. "What's your take on it?"

The big man shrugged. "Dunno. If that rich-bitch Adair wants to spend all of her family's money on some crazy idea, it doesn't make any difference to me. All I know is that she pays well. We load 'em up, pop in the deep freeze for a few years, drop 'em off, then wave goodbye. After that, it's none of my business."

"Have you met any of the kids?" Alonzo asked, thinking of Sergei and Marisa.

"Nope. I can certainly understand her motives. I've got a kid myself. If she was sick, I'd do whatever I could to save her. That's why I took this job. Well, the money didn't hurt, either."

"What about your daughter?"

"Oh, she's coming along. She's pretty handy with the more delicate stuff. O'Neill doesn't have any problem with it, as long as she keeps out from underfoot," his eyes beamed with pride. "So, you think you can find this G-eight-seven place that we're going to?"

"G889," Alonzo corrected Danziger. "I never miss," he bragged. "I've got the best record in the Guild."

Danziger chuckled. "You willin' to put your credits where your mouth is?"

"You mean like a wager? Sure, I'll take your sucker bet. What're ya offering?"

The big man thought a moment. "What do you flyboys hate most? Last I heard, it was cleaning the waste reclamation unit after we come out of cold sleep."

"That's your job, not mine," Alonzo shot back.

"It's your job if you come out off-target, hotshot."

"Better let your boys get ready to clean toilets after everyone wakes up, Danziger. Because you're all gonna be up to your necks in sixty people's crap."

Danziger laughed and shook his head. "You're not gonna be as good-looking with a toilet brush in your hand, Ace," he chortled.

Both of them were interrupted by a Zero unit entering the cockpit. It was carrying a monitor. Alonzo ignored it, but Danziger gave the robot a withering look. "Where should I put this, sir?" the Zero asked Danziger, who told the Zero in no uncertain terms.

"But sir, I cannot do that. My body does not have that part."

Danziger sneered. "Put it where it's supposed to go, you stupid bucket of bolts," he muttered and pointed to an empty hole in the wall. "In there. And let ME hook it up this time!"

"Yes, sir, right away sir!" the Zero responded, as it lumbered over to the wall.

"Damn Zeros," the tech muttered. "Can't trust 'em to do the job right."

Alonzo made his way to the door. "Looks like you've got the situation under control, Danziger. I'll just leave you two alone."

"Very funny, hotshot," the tech shot back. Alonzo left the flight deck to the sound of John Danziger cursing the robot.

15 January 2192, 0700 Station Time

"Priority One message from Spacing Guild Dispatch," Alonzo's avatar announced, waking him from a sound sleep.

"Solace here," he mumbled, trying not to wake the woman who was sleeping naked next to him. Her name was Monique, or something like that. He didn't remember last night too clearly.

"Alonzo, it's Marisa," the avatar screen showed Marisa's face. "And I know that you have a woman with you, so don't try to hide it."

He grinned. "Hey, it could have been you, Marisa..." he fired back.

"In your dreams, Ace," she grinned. "I've got good news."

"Morgan Martin's off the Eden Project? Adair has decided to pay us five times the Guild rate? What is it?"

"We have a departure date!" Marisa smiled. "I just got the go-ahead from Dison Blalock. We're going in a week, on January 22nd."

"A _week?_ Isn't that short notice?" His voice raised, waking Monique.

Monique popped her blonde head out from under the sheet. "What's

going on, Lonzo?"

He turned to his bed partner. "Eden Project is leaving in a week."

Monique pouted. "Does this mean that you won't be around?" Obviously, the girl was a natural blonde.

"Alonzo, stop talking to your puttana and listen to me," Marisa snapped from the avatar screen. "Your team and Sheila's have a pre-flight meeting at 1000 in the Guild offices, then another meeting with O'Neill after that. Of course, you'll have to do the normal checkout procedures for the Guild."

"Yeah, yeah," he waved her off.

"Also, Adair wants to have a party or something. Sort of a get-acquainted event for the crew to meet the passengers. She figures that these people won't be dressed up ever again, so she wants to give them one last hurrah. It's going to be Saturday night in the ADC lobby. Jacket and tie required, so go and rent one."

"Give me a break!" he grumbled.

"I know that you'd rather spend your evenings drinking and wenching, but this is a command performance," she snapped. Alonzo thought she was acting more like a mother than a liaison at that point.

"All right, Marisa. Now, go away so I can get dressed."

"Nothing that I haven't seen before," she smirked, then the screen went black.

Monique looked up at him with her pretty blue eyes. "What's a puttana?" she asked.

Alonzo blushed. "Uh... it's Italian for, uh.... girlfriend," he replied. Gee, thanks, Marisa, he thought as he rolled out of a nice, warm, occupied bed.

January 20, 2191, 2000 hours

Alonzo pulled at the tight tie that was threatening to choke him to death. It had been decades since he'd been in a suit. If it were up to him, it would be a few more decades before the next time, too. He stood outside Marisa's apartment and rang the chime a second time. He heard Marisa's muffled voice yell something from inside, then she opened the door.

Marisa was dressed in a long, emerald-green sheath that matched the color of her eyes. Her red hair was slicked back, which only served to highlight her face. She wore a matching choker and earrings made of malachite. Alonzo found himself staring at her in utter shock. She smiled at him. "Well, are you going to come in, or stand there with your jaw on the floor?"

He started to say something, but was interrupted by the telltale sound of Sergei's immuno-suit. The boy walked to the door and looked up at his mother. "Mom's pretty, huh?"

Alonzo grinned at the boy. "You sure know how to get to a woman's heart," he laughed.

"He's taking after his Uncle Alonzo," Marisa replied. She bent down - giving Alonzo an accidental view of her cleavage - and kissed the top of her son's head. "Now, don't stay up too late, Sergei. We have a big day ahead of us tomorrow. Make sure all of your things are packed, because the movers are coming tomorrow morning."

"Yes, Mom," Sergei nodded.

"Mandy, I should be back here by midnight," Marisa called back to Sergei's sitter. "You have my Gear signal in case something happens. And make sure he does go to bed early," she added.

"They'll be fine," Alonzo reassured her. "Let's go."

They made their way by shuttle to the NorthAm 14 Station, and rode the lift to the floor that housed Adair Design Corporation. The large lobby had been converted into a giant cocktail party. Over by the fountain, a bar was set up. People were clustered around it, naturally. On the other side of the room, a jazz combo was playing. The skylight louvers had been opened to show the dramatic view of Earth from the station.

"Ms. Adair certainly is dramatic," Marisa muttered.

"How so?"

"This is probably the last time that we'll see the Earth," she replied, a little wistfully.

"Yeah, but look what you're going to. An untouched wilderness where your kid can grow up," he reminded her. "Besides, it's not like you've never left Earth before."

She smiled at him. "I know. I just feel sorry for those who haven't. Like her," she nodded toward a woman with curly light-brown hair who was staring out the window at the planet below. The woman was dressed in a simple black dress and pumps, and was fingering some kind of pendant. As Alonzo and Marisa watched, a man carrying two glasses of champagne approached her. The man said something to the woman, she turned, and took the glass from his hand. They toasted each other, then kissed. Alonzo realized that he'd seen the man before - it was that weaselly bureaucrat, Morgan Martin!

"Would you look at that," he smirked. "Who would have thought that Martin would have such an attractive wife?"

"I hear that she's an Earth-rez," Marisa observed drily. "I'll bet she got the shock of her life to find out that her ticket up the gravity well is being sent out of known space."

Alonzo smirked at his friend's catty comment. Fortunately, he was rescued by the approach of a gorgeous redhead with an attitude. "Nobody told me that we had to bring a date to this party," Sheila Willis said as she sidled up to him.

"We're just friends," Marisa interjected.

"Yeah, I'm still available for you to take me home," Alonzo added.

"In your dreams, Solace," Sheila shot back.

"Hey, a guy's gotta try."

"Alonzo, be a gentleman for a change and get me a glass of wine," Marisa retorted.

He gave her a questioning look, but realized that Marisa had something to discuss with Sheila. It was probably related to the Colony ship, so he didn't much care. He crossed the room to the bar to get Marisa's drink. The party was crowded. Parents were mingling with the medical staff, but the flight crews stayed pretty much to themselves. Baines, Sam, Jenna, and Lakshmi were over in the corner laughing at some joke. Sheila and Marisa had joined them.

As he approached the bar, he felt someone collide with his right side, and something liquid hit his arm. He looked over, and saw a slim, blonde woman with blue eyes in an entirely-too-serious face. She was wearing a light blue dress that emphasized the color of her eyes. He had the impression that he'd seen her before somewhere. She looked up at him and blushed with embarrassment. "Oh, God, I'm so sorry," the woman stammered as she tried to mop up the white wine on his jacket.

"Hey, it's a rental anyway," he grinned. "I'm Alonzo Solace, pilot for the Advance ship." He held out his hand to her.

"Julia Heller. I'm the doctor assigned to assist Dr. Vasquez in setting up the hospital."

"That's where I met you!" he suddenly realized. "Marisa took me to visit her son on the Syndrome ward. You came in and told the kids that someone had died."

"Oh, yes!" she smiled, "You're Ms. Ivanova's friend." Then a frown creased her brow. "Kenny McCormick had died. He was such a sweet boy..."

"Hey, just look at it this way. A few years from now, you're gonna wake up from cold sleep and find the cure for the Syndrome," he tried to cheer her up.

"I hope so," she sighed. "Anyway, I hope I didn't damage your suit too much."

"It'll be fine. See ya tomorrow, Doc?" he asked with a wink.

Julia shrugged. "I guess so." She moved away, back toward the rest of what he guessed were the medical staff.

"I'll be looking forward to it," he said as she walked away from him. Alonzo found himself intrigued with this attractive doctor, even though she clearly had no interest in him. Maybe there would be a chance to get to know her better during the trip.

"I know that look," a woman said from behind him. He turned to see Marisa standing there, looking impatient. "You were supposed to get

me a drink, not spill it all over yourself."

"Oh, sorry," he grinned at his friend. He offered her his glass of wine, which she took.

"Who's the lucky woman in your crosshairs tonight, Ace?" she teased. "Dr. Heller? Quite a challenge, even for you."

"Lay off, Marisa," he growled. "Besides, she's not interested. Not yet."

Marisa shook her head with mock sympathy. "And she isn't going to be. You're much too old to hold her attention. She's devoted to the Syndrome kids, but that's about it. No social life, no men, no nothing."

"How boring," he shrugged. "I'm sure that I could change that."

Marisa gave him kiss on the cheek. "Now, why would you want to do that? I'm sure that there's other women here that wouldn't mind spending their last night on the Stations with you."

Alonzo turned and gave her an inquiring look. "Anyone in particular?"

"You never know..." she teased, then walked away toward the corner where the rest of the flight crew was standing.

As Alonzo followed her with his eyes, he noticed another stunning woman speaking with the uncomfortably tuxedo-clad Commander O'Neill. He did a quick double-take, and saw that the woman was Devon Adair. She was darkly beautiful in a clingy red silk dress that left very little to the imagination. Her hair was done up in an elaborate style, and she wore a necklace of what he presumed were real rubies. She smiled at O'Neill and laughed at a joke. Alonzo, never one to pass up a beautiful woman, moved through the crowd to talk to her. He touched her elbow, and she turned. "Mr. Solace," she smiled. "I'm glad that you got my invitation. Thank you for coming this evening. I'm sure that you and your crew would rather be someplace else, but I'm glad you could make it."

He grinned, flashing the thousand-watt Solace smile at her. "I wouldn't miss it, Devon. I never pass up free drinks and a chance to meet beautiful women." He arched his eyebrow in a subtle look. She smiled again. "However, I don't see your son here," he commented.

"Uly's with his tutor," she explained. "He's very excitable, especially since we've gotten the go-ahead from the Council. Besides, children get bored at this type of party."

"I suppose so," he agreed.

"So, did everything get put into storage safely?" she asked. "I could threaten LaPointe again if it didn't." They both laughed at the memory.

"Not yet. They storage crew will pick up my boxes once I check out," he explained. "I still have my bed for one more night."

She nodded knowingly. "And let me guess. You're looking for someone to keep you company in it, right?" Devon smirked.

Damn! Shot down this quickly! Alonzo thought. _I'm losing my touch._ "Well, now that you mention it..." he replied. "But, I wasn't suggesting..."

"Don't worry, Mr. Solace. I'm not offended. In fact, I'm rather flattered. Even if I didn't have to worry about my son, I just have too much to do before we board. I'm probably not going to get any sleep as it is. But thank you for your interest."

His jaw dropped. He hadn't been turned down in a long time. Well, other than Jenna, but that was different. He'd never met any woman like Devon Adair. He was almost disappointed that he wasn't going to get to know her better. She was a fascinating woman.

Fortunately, his embarrassment was short-lived. Marisa had seen him, and was making her way over to them from the bar. She greeted both of them, and gave Devon a quick hug. "Has Alonzo been bothering you?" she asked the other woman. "I need to keep him on a short leash."

"Is that a promise or a threat, Marisa?" Alonzo teased. Both women laughed nervously.

As they laughed, O'Neill joined them. "Dev, the Ops chief is on Gear and he needs to speak with you personally. Sorry to interrupt." O'Neill pulled a Gear set out of his jacket pocket and handed it to her.

Devon looked apologetically at Alonzo and Marisa. "Like I said earlier, I have a lot of things to take care of. If you'll excuse me," she said, then placed the Gear set over her elaborate hairdo and looked for a quiet place to use it.

Marisa smirked at Alonzo. "Nice try, but she's way out of your league."

"What is it with you tonight?" he countered.

"My friend," Marisa put her arm around his waist in an almost territorial move. "I know how you work. I know that you're trying to score one last time before departure. It's just that, well, the women that you're trying to score with aren't interested in the same thing."

"I see. And, do you have someone else in mind?" he joked.

"Yes. Me," she deadpanned.

"What? Madame 'I can't have a relationship because of my son' Ivanova is looking for a good time? I don't believe it."

Marisa stared very intently at the floor. "It's true, I don't want a relationship. But, this will probably be the last time we see each other, old friend. So, how about it for old times' sake?"

He laughed and pulled her close. "You don't have to ask twice," he

whispered, then kissed her in front of the whole party.

January 21 - NorthAm Station, 0700 hours

Alonzo awoke to the smell of strong tea being brewed. He opened his eyes and sat up. Marisa was in the kitchenette of his small room, wearing her dress from last night, and making tea. "Oh, good, you're awake," she said. "I know that you're packed up, but do you have any sugar?" she asked.

"Uh, no," he replied. "I can call room service if you like."

"Oh, never mind," she grinned. "I'll go without. By the way, don't forget to use up the milk. Housekeeping really hates when they get spoiled food in the units."

"So, how is Sergei?" he changed the subject.

"He did well with the sitter overnight. He's very excited about boarding. I told him that I'd be home soon."

Alonzo stood up, completely naked. Not that it mattered - they'd seen and done a lot more last night. He walked over to the kitchenette and gave her a kiss. "Last night was incredible," he murmured in her ear.

She playfully pushed him away. "I'll bet you say that to all of your conquests," she laughed.

"Was that a complement or an insult?" he shot back. "I meant it. It was great."

She turned and looked at him seriously. "I know. I wanted to do this. Ever since I found out that you were back. I always wanted my last night in civilization to be with you, my friend. I wanted something to think about when I go into cryo for the last time."

He kissed her forehead tenderly. "I'm glad you chose me. Now, go home to your son. We've both got a big day ahead of us."

She kissed him one more time, then walked toward the door of his quarters. As the door opened, she turned back. "Thank you very much, my friend. For everything." With that, she Marisa Ivanova turned and walked out of Alonzo Solace's life for the last time.

He looked after her, then broke contact. He picked up a holographic picture of that cute blonde, Monique, and looked at it. Then, he tossed Monique's holo on top of his lucky dice and leather jacket, in preparation for the job ahead.

1000 hours, NorthAm 3 Spacedock, _G.C.S. Roanoake_, VA-1587

Alonzo, Jenna, and Baines somehow managed to find each other in the crush of people and cargo at the departure gate of the spacedock. Although the Eden colonists weren't scheduled to board until 1200 hours, some of them apparently thought that they could secure berths by getting there two hours ahead. Meanwhile, the Ops crew was busy trying to pull everything together. Alonzo looked across the room at the _Jamestown_'s gate, where Sheila was being hammered with questions by the passengers. He waved to her, and she responded

half-heartedly.

At precisely 1000, the docking hatch opened. Alonzo was greeted by the grinning face of that big mechanic, Danziger. "Okay, folks, we're going to do this in an orderly fashion," Danziger announced. "Let's get the flyboys on first. Once they get settled, we have to run through some preliminary checks before we let everyone on board."

"Wait a minute," Morgan Martin complained as he shoved his way forward. "As the Government representative..." he began.

"You'll get to wait with everyone else," Danziger growled and stared the scrawny bureaucrat down. "You're going to be on this ship for a long time, so enjoy your last bit of Station life while you can. Unless you'd like to help us test an airlock." He nodded his head toward Alonzo and his team. "Okay, hotshot. Let's get this show on the road."

"You got it, buddy," Alonzo grinned, as he shouldered his rucksack and practically bounded down the ramp.

Once in the cockpit, he settled down into a comfortable routine with Jenna and Baines. The first thing he did was to kiss his lucky dice, and hang them from a switch on the ceiling. Then, he put the holo of Monique near his station. He didn't even want to think about Marisa. There was no point. As of now, she was officially out of his life, off to her own adventure. He wished her well. "Jenna," he called out, "how's the APEX system looking?"

"All systems are green to go," she replied.

Broderick O'Neill entered the flight deck and immediately looked over Alonzo's shoulder. "How we doin', Ace?" he asked. He smelled faintly of tobacco smoke and alcohol. It had probably been a long night for the Commander, too.

"Everything looks good," Alonzo replied. "We're all settled in. Now, let's get these people on board."

"Roger that, Ace," O'Neill laughed, then headed back out the door. Alonzo paused to look down the long chamber as the spacedock doors yawned opened for an incoming freighter. He was struck again by the vast blackness and multitudinous points of light. Soon, very soon, he would be back out there, in that sky full of stars.

Epilogue: Planet G889, shortly after A Memory Play

Seated under the open sky, Alonzo looked into the fire. It was supposed to warm the members of Eden Advance, but everyone felt cold that night. Each person around the fire had lost a fellow crewman, friend, or lover this day, and compared to the unbounded darkness, each felt smaller, emptier, and colder than before.

In a fair universe, the Advance Team members onboard the last escape pod would have been around the fire right now, and Alonzo would have been joking with Jenna, the pod captain, about surviving yet another close call. The roster alone proved how many crewmen would have owed her their lives. When Morgan Martin stole a pod, many had shifted to hers. She had waited to pick up the extra personnel, and skillfully

directed her heavily loaded pod to a safe landing site.

Of course, in the real universe, no good deed goes unpunished. Jenna's passengers had included Alex Wentworth, the unwitting saboteur who carried the "memory virus" contagion. Baines and Danziger had discovered the pod, and their contact with its infected victims had nearly killed them.

Then again, a fair universe wouldn't include Councilmember Dyson Blalock. He was too much of a coward to do anything with his own bare hands (no wonder he'd been able to climb so high in the Council). However, through Wentworth, he'd murdered Jenna and the others. He'd caused the crash too, but knowing that was no real comfort to Alonzo.

At least this new planet seemed to be on their side. It provided the pretty doctor, Julia, with the basis for a cure for the memory virus.

Alonzo was used to tracking multiple considerations all at once. It was a necessary skill for piloting spacecraft. It was also how he piloted the waters of romantic conquests — in order to be every woman's type, you had to be able to find out what each woman wants, and find it before they know they want it. However, Alonzo was overwhelmed by the last few days' feelings of hope, fear, and final defeat. He wasn't sure about his feelings for Julia, either. He hadn't felt this way since his time with Lydia at Garsonia Starbase. Like the Terrians that invaded his dreams, his feelings for Julia were a mystery to him.

As he mused, he noticed Baines draw up close to him.

"Hey, man," Baines greeted him.

"Hey," Alonzo responded. "Feeling better?"

"Yeah. You owe me, though. I remembered that time I whooped your ass in poker after the Wolf 359 run, and you never paid up!" Baines teased.

"You never whooped my ass," Alonzo joked.

"Yeah, right," the black man laughed, then got serious. "I just wanted you to know that we found Jenna's body," he said quietly. "I tripped over her when we were running towards the cargo pod."

Alonzo was stunned. He'd held out some small hope that Jenna had survived, after all. "Shank it!" he cursed. "All she wanted to do was to go on vacation. I talked her into this, and now she's dead."

"I know, man. I know," Baines agreed and clapped a hand on Alonzo's shoulder.

"I could never understand why..." Alonzo paused, looking for the right words.

"Why she never 'executed docking maneuvers' with you? Or even succumb to the Solace Smile?" Baines laughed grimly.

"No, that's not what I was going to say!" Alonzo snapped. "I never understood why she relented, came along with us on this. I could tell she was getting to the point where she really needed a vacation, really needed to have one to stay sharp."

Baines hesitated for a moment. "I'm sorry, man. That was on my mind for a different reason. See, you're not really the reason she came along. I think Sheila was."

Now it was Alonzo's time to stop and think. "Huh?"

"Alonzo, you may know a lot about getting women in the sack, but you don't know jack about them."

"Come on, man," Alonzo sneered.

"Jenna, well ... you just weren't her type. Neither was I. Sheila was. I think Jenna didn't want to lose Sheila to the cold-sleep time lag. You know how that goes. And I think Sheila felt the same way," Baines hinted.

Alonzo stared at his friend. "Jenna was a lesbian? And she never told me? What kind of Twentieth-Century knuckle-dragger did she think I was?"

Baines shrugged. "She swore me to secrecy. She thought it was funny, and as she would say, 'rather pathetic'. Besides, she thought that if you weren't trying to hit on her, you'd move on and she'd lose a friend. Jenna liked you, not in a sexual way, but as a crewmate. One time she told me that you were a real quality guy, only you didn't know it yet. You know, you can be friends with a woman without hopping in the sack with her," his friend reminded him.

"Someone else told me something similar just recently," he looked across the fire at Julia Heller.

"Yeah, well maybe if you weren't so busy trying to score, you'd have realized that a long time ago," Baines observed. "You do have to admit, she did get the last laugh."

"Yeah, I guess she did," Alonzo conceded. The two men stood in silence, each saluting their dead comrade.

"I had one other thing ... we went ahead and buried her," said Baines. "We didn't want anyone else exposed to the virus. I know we have a cure, but maybe it doesn't work for everyone, or whatever."

"Tell me about it."

"Not much to tell. We buried her under the stars," Baines told him. "She's a good navigator. She'll find her way home."

"Yes, but will we?" Alonzo asked. They both stared out into that great big sky full of stars, trying to find the answer.

* * *

End
file.